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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 000720

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TAGS: PHUM PREF YM HUMAN RIGHTS

SUBJECT: ROYG POLICE END SIT-IN BY ETHIOPIAN REFUGEES AT
UNHCR SANA'A

REF: A. SANAA 546

B. SANAA 397

1. (U) Summary. Following a partial closing by UNHCR of its offices in Sana'a and a threat to close permanently, Yemeni police intervened on March 19 to end the sit-in by Ethiopian refugees which began February 10, thus ending the potential security threat posed to the adjacent residence of the DCM. The question of long-term status of the group of Ethiopian refugees affiliated with the Mengistu navy remains unresolved, however, and a number of them remain in jail. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On March 11th the Assistant UN High Commissioner for Human Rights met in Geneva with Ahmed Al Basha, the Director of the Africa Department at the MFA, to discuss the sit-in and try to find a way to bring it to a peaceful end. According to Saad Al-Attar of UNHCR Sana'a who was present at the meeting, Al-Basha wanted a letter from UNHCR requesting the ROYG to disperse the crowd while UNHCR wanted the ROYG to end the demonstration peacefully in 3 to 4 days without a written request. The Asst. High Commissioner authorized Al-Attar to close the Sana'a office if the sit-in was not brought to a peaceful end. Al-Basha informed Al-Attar that he would return to Sana'a on March 13 to resolve the situation but instead decided to take a week-long holiday in Geneva. With the sit-in continuing and the refugee camp taking on a semi-permanent quality including large tented areas, a hot food preparation facility and large numbers of regular inhabitants, Al-Attar sent most UNHCR employees to work from home or to work out of various NGO offices in Sana'a starting Monday March 15.

3. (SBU) On March 19 the ROYG moved to break up the demonstration. According to an eyewitness account by the DCM, ROYG police removed the Ethiopian men from the sit-in site and dismantled their camp early on the morning March 19. Later that morning over 100 Ethiopians, mostly women, re-occupied the site after police departed. After repeated attempts by the police to negotiate with the demonstrators who eventually began to throw rocks at UNHCR's building, the police used high-pressure water to disperse the crowd and reportedly arrested over 100 men and women. During the confrontation, some demonstrators fled over the wall to the DCMR compound but were quickly removed. The DCM departed the DCMR shortly after these incursions began.

3. (SBU) According to various reports from observers, employers of Ethiopian men and women and Ethiopians known to Embassy personnel, the arrested demonstrators, some of whom were mothers of infants and/or toddlers, were still in custody several days after the police action. According to information provided by the MOI to the ARSO, as of March 30 only men remain in custody but the number of detainees is unknown. According to information provided by the PSO to UNHCR, PSO is holding the "leaders" of the demonstration. The other detainees will be released gradually upon execution of an undertaking by each detainee to refrain from future threats to Yemeni security. There is no word on when/whether the leaders will be released.

4. (U) UNHCR employees returned to their offices on March 20 but remain closed to appointments with refugees. UNHCR plans to resume normal operations on April 3. The DCM returned to his residence on March 19.

5. (SBU) ICMC visited Sana'a and successfully interviewed cases referred by UNHCR during the course of the sit-in. Interviews were held at the Sheraton Hotel and were not interrupted by demonstrators. Meanwhile, PRM has requested information about what they now refer to as The Naval Group from UNHCR in order to reevaluate whether they qualify for resettlement to the US. According to Al-Attar, the response to this request is sensitive and will require careful drafting. Al-Attar is now away on medical leave for an undetermined period of time. His TDY replacement, Steve Corliss, has agreed to respond to the inquiry prior to the DHS visit to Sana'a but notes that UNHCR wants to see a 'cooling-off' period prior to resuming any dialogue with the Naval Group.

16. (U) Comment. The immediate security threat to UNHCR and the DCMR has been removed but the ongoing dilemma of how/whether to resettle the Ethiopians, either in the U.S. or elsewhere, remains. While it is unlikely that a referral will be forthcoming from UNHCR prior to the planned visit by DHS regional representative approximately one month from now, based on the successful conclusion of the ICMC visit Post believes DHS should go ahead with its plan to come to Sana'a. End Comment.
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